

International Tobacco Accountability Bulletin

News, Updates and Analyses of Issues Related to International Tobacco

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A Marlboro Girl Speaks Out

In countries around the world – Africa to Asia to Eastern Europe – Philip Morris employs young women to don short skirts, color-coordinated with the company's cigarette brands, and distribute free cigarettes. In some cases the "Marlboro Girls" are not yet adults themselves.

The story of a 17-year-old Sara Bogdani's experience as a Marlboro girl in Albania was exposed by the New York Times in August (*Big Tobacco Is Accused of Crossing an Age Line*, by Greg Winter, 8/24/01). At the 2001 Philip Morris shareholders meeting in April, CEO Geoffrey Bible rigorously denied that any underage persons sell Philip Morris cigarette brands overseas.

In January, Sara Bogdani was interviewed about her experience as a Marlboro Girl and her subsequent work as a youth tobacco control advocate. Here is an excerpt:

I am Sara Bogdani, from Tirana, Albania. I am 17 years old.

In July 2000, while on vacation, I was approached by a neighbor of mine, working for a trade company, who offered me a summer job. So I started promoting the Philip Morris cigarettes (Marlboro and Bond).

My job, and that of my colleagues (two other attractive young girls), which was a well paid one (300 USD per month while a physician or a teacher normally gets about 100 USD per month) consisted in offering cigarettes to smokers passing-by.

The smokers who liked the cigarette could buy them and get a present, e.g. lighters or sunglasses, depending on the number on the packs of cigarettes they had bought.

It was a work that took a great part of my day, because we did not advertise only in Tirana, but we used to move frequently to other cities like Durrës and Elbasan. In these towns we were not stationed in one place, but had to move from one place to another, like market places in the open air or places with a lot of people. We used to work four hours in the morning and two or three in the afternoon.

At the end of August during one of such promotion round in the city of Durrës, I saw two men coming toward me. One of them was smoking a cigarette, so I offered him a Marlboro cigarette, as I started the presentation. At the end of my pitch the non-smoker told me about his job. He was Roland Shuperka, the WHO anti-tobacco counterpart and the president of the Association "For a Tobacco-Free Albania." He gave me his phone number. I promised to call him.

Nevertheless some time passed by until October, when he came to my school, on the occasion of the "Week of Resistance to Tobacco Transnationals" to show the film "Making a Killing". I was still working for Philip Morris. I was really shocked by what I saw. Watching the film, I began to change my mind. I learned about many international organizations and the fight they were waging against tobacco.

From that moment I thought that what I did from promotion of cigarettes was a very ugly thing and I decided to quit.

With the other members of the association, we are trying to change the ways things are going in our country. We are in all the protests, in the newspapers, the TVs. We want to pass a tobacco control act and reduce the percentage of young smokers. We are organizing for World No Tobacco Day and supporting a local hospital that is going smokefree. I am going to the schools to give lectures. We are trying our best. But there is a lot of advertising and promotion for cigarettes and very little against tobacco. We hope to make progress.

For full text see:

Rendez-vous 86, by Philippe Boucher 1/11/01

<http://www.tobacco.org/News/rendezvous/bogdani.html>

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